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Molly Anderson

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Invisible Armies: French Colonial Soldiers During World War I and Their Absence from History

Molly Anderson

University of North Dakota, Department of History

Colonial Memory in French Education

- Consider the case of Article 4:
 - 2005: Article 4 forced French educators to focus on teaching the “positive” aspects of colonialism.
 - No event in history is entirely good, which should be reflected in how each event is remembered.
 - What do we make of a country that would try to enforce this kind of policy?

Topic

- How does our understanding of the past shape our perception of the world around us today?
- France is a case study of racial issues that plague democracies worldwide.
 - There are direct parallels between French debates about colonialism and similar racially charged issues in the United States.

World War I Historical Context (1914-1918)

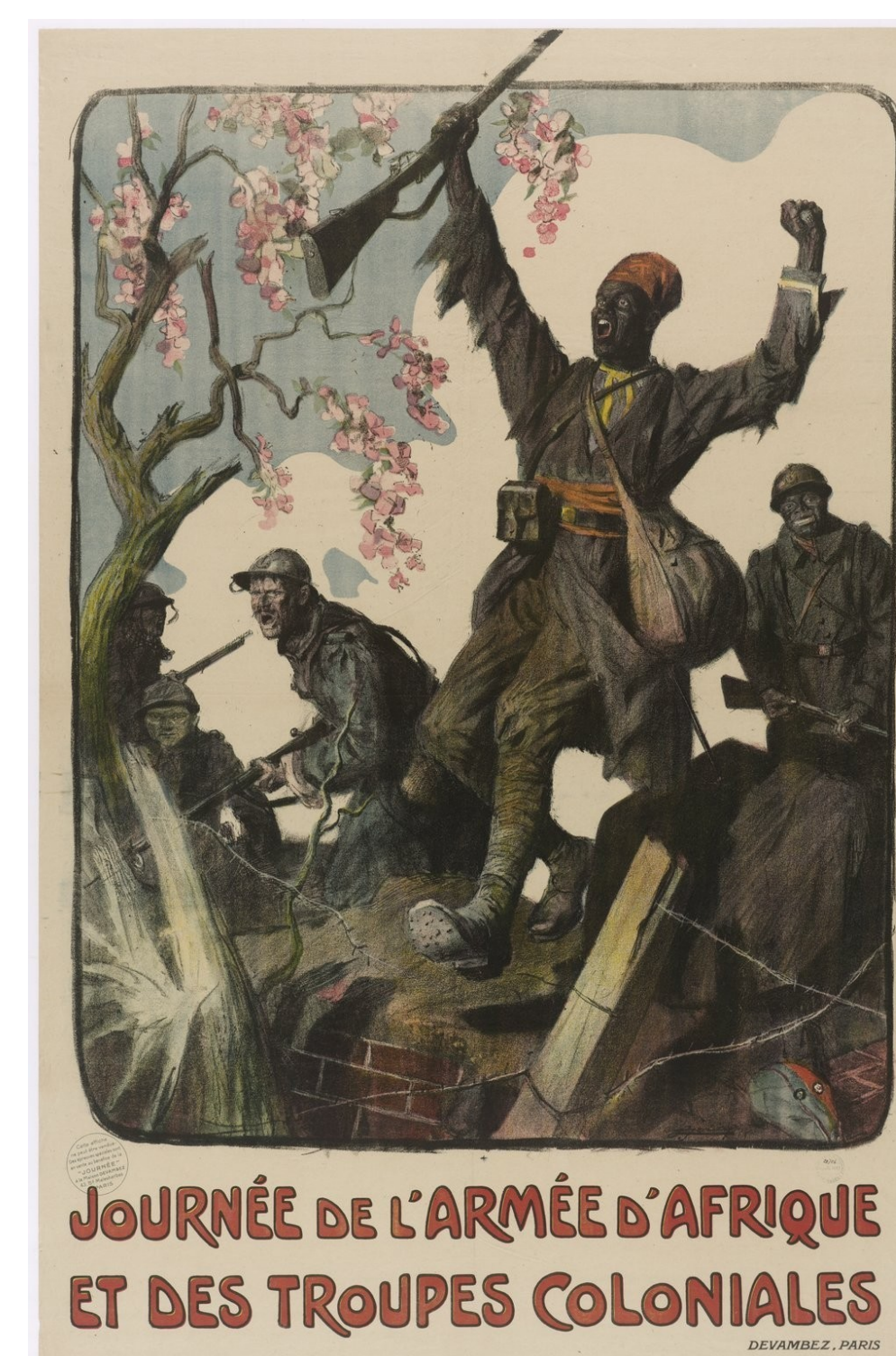
- France had the second largest empire in the world during this conflict.
- Colonial soldiers were considered “cannon fodder” and likely died in higher numbers than French soldiers.



Map from *The Story of the Great War, Volume III*, 2009.

Posters and Propaganda (1914-1918)

The Barbaric Savage



- Notice how the black soldier in the foreground appears violently angry and less in control of his rage than his white French counterparts.

Poster by Lucien Jonas, 1917.

The Simple Child

- Pay close attention to the physical features of these colonial subjects, particularly their eyes and their smiles.
- It is also important to note the pidgen French in the captions.



Left: Postcard. Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration. Right: Advertisement. Gallica.

Photographs (1914-1918)

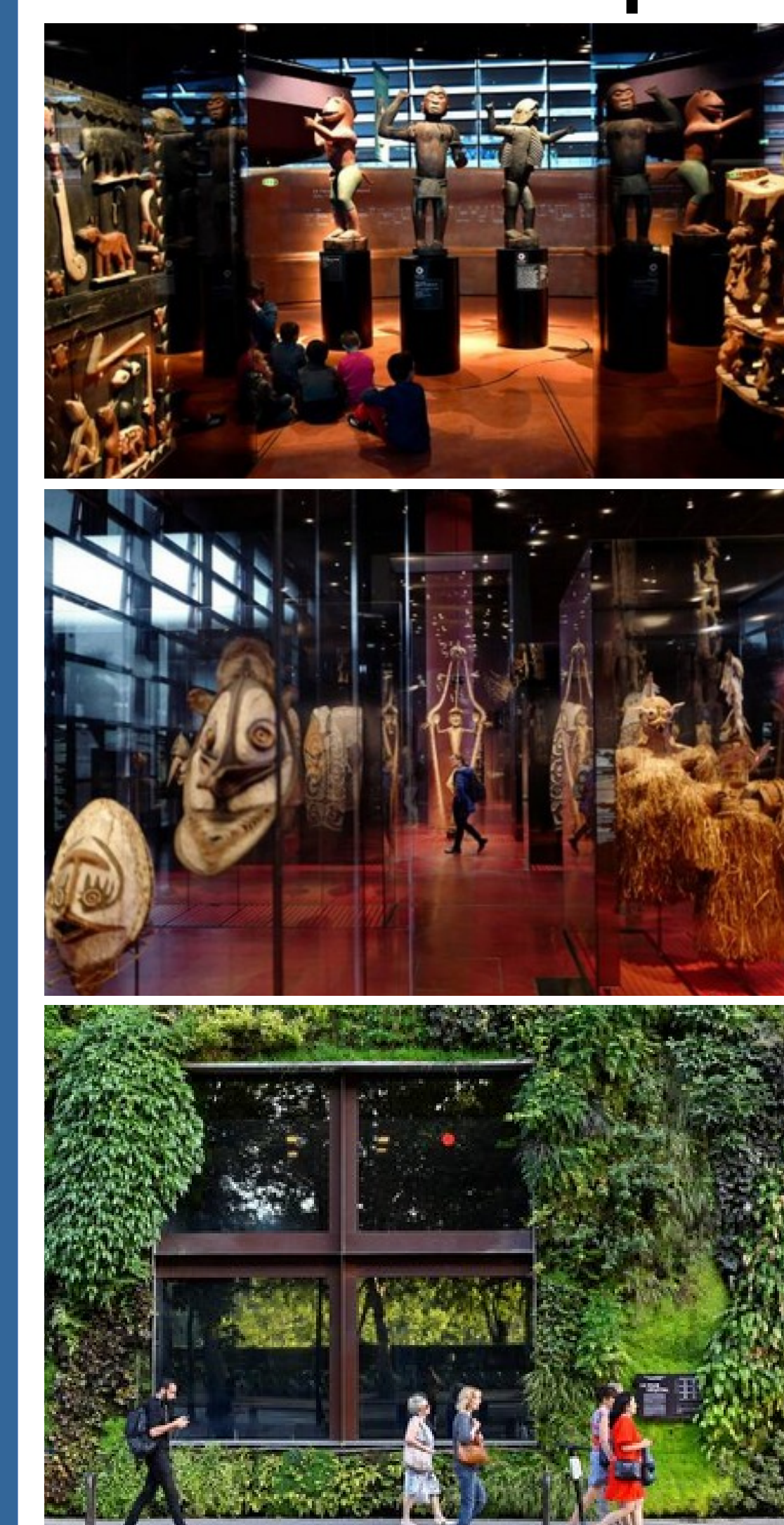


- White French women and children were considered especially vulnerable at this time, so physical embraces between members of these groups and colonial soldiers was a big deal.

Top: Photograph by Neurdein, n.d. Bottom: Photograph by Albert Harlingue, 1913.

French Museums (2006-present)

Quai Branly Museum – Jacques Chirac

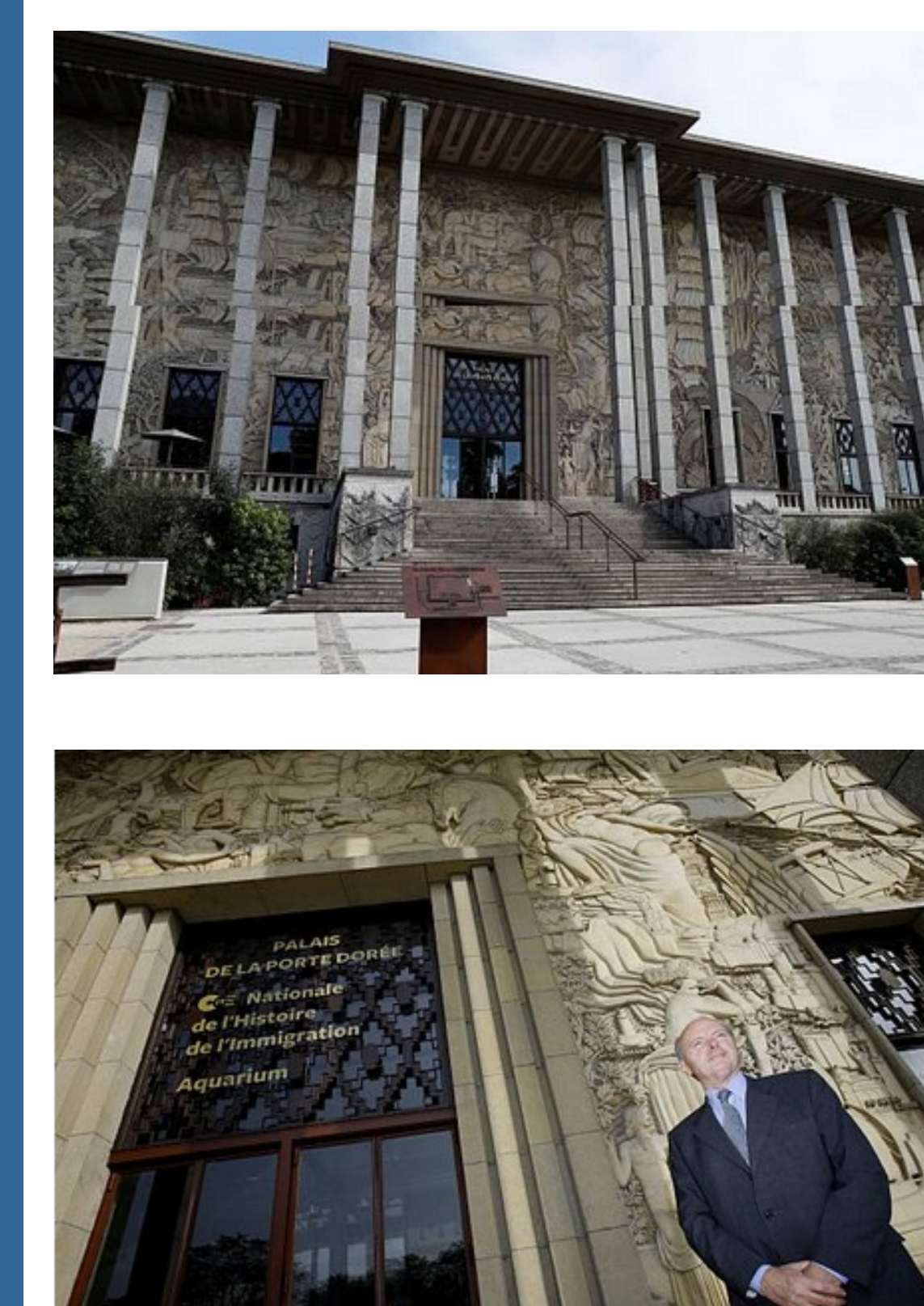


- Design elements like lighting, audio, and landscaping are meant to convey the exotic.
- Exhibits are organized with no regard to cultural group or time period.

Top: Photograph by Gerard Julien, 2018. Middle: Photograph by Ludovic Marin, 2018. Bottom: Photograph. Anadolu Agency, 2019.

French Museums (2006-present)

National Museum for the History of Immigration



Top: Photograph by Thomas Samson, 2016. Bottom: Photograph from WANDY CZ Kaisa, 2007.

- The building the museum is housed in has a controversial colonial history.
 - The exterior is covered in a misleading bas-relief depicting former French colonial subjects laboring peacefully.

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